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Poetry, Texas: a critical reflection

Abstract
Poetry, Texas is a lyrical work in which an ensemble of voices, snatches of actuality and compelling narration is woven into a meditation on a fading way of life and beauty within the ordinary. It's a piece in which style and substance figure as enamoured equals engaged in a delightful dance. Malinovski's journey into the heart of the Texan town of Poetry is the central narrative frame of this work. An ensemble cast of fourteen characters including a cowboy called Rooster, Don Strictland, the undeclared mayor of Poetry, schoolchildren, various religious leaders and the local historian gives voice to the community. The sonic frame of *Poetry, Texas* articulates two distinct aural planes that both extend and enhance the thematic dynamic he develops between the literal and literary meaning of 'poetry'.

Malinovski's physical journey and the town community are both represented by earthy unrehearsed location recordings. The recordings position the listener as an observer rather than the one spoken to. The material feels experiential and 'of the moment'; it is steeped in a diegetic sense of a lived environment and continuous timeframe. In contrast, Malinovski's narration is controlled, scripted and recorded in a dead room with a warm, close microphone. A strong reliance on this form of authorial first-person narration can easily become heavy-handed and narratively swamp and overpower other voices and sounds. Of course the mitigating quality here is the poetic inclination of Malinovski's narration – the degree to which his thoughts, ideas and arguments provide a permeable and playful series of observations, connections and resonant sound-word ideas for listeners to engage with. Like a flip card with a picture of a bird on one side and a cage on the other that is animated through movement, Malinovski manages to capture and express something about Poetry that is intangible, provocative, playful and beautiful with a delightfully light touch.

Kyla Brettle is Lecturer in the Media Program at RMIT University, Melbourne and an independent radio documentary maker. Her work explores the theory and practice of observational radio and the rich affordances of audio in non-fiction storytelling. Her features have been broadcast internationally and she has won Best New Artist at the Third Coast International Audio Festival. She is completing a PhD examining online and participatory audio documentary production. *Poetry, Texas* received a special commendation from the judges of the Prix Europa 2012.

Keywords
radio documentary, radio feature, Malinovski

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Poetry, Texas.

Produced and presented by Pejk Malinovski, a Falling Tree Production for BBC Radio 4 (2012). Duration: 27' 40".

Reviewer: Kyla Brettle



Water tower, Poetry, Texas. Image: P. Malinowski

A literary practice connoting cultural sophistication, investigations of the deep mysteries of existence, and a tradition stretching back to ancient civilisations, 'Poetry' is also the quirky name for a seemingly mundane Southwestern United States town described as a 'bunch of houses along a road with a gas station in the middle, three churches and a school' (4'34"). The unlikely poetry of the Texan town of Poetry is the central theme and tension of this work by Danish Falling Tree producer Pejk Malinovski, who fully exploits the playful and poignant images that follow when the word 'poetry' is substituted for the name of a place– my favourite is, 'for a traveller, there is nowhere to sleep in Poetry' (7'15").

Poetry, Texas is a lyrical work in which an ensemble of voices, snatches of actuality and compelling narration are woven into a meditation on a fading way of life and beauty within the ordinary. It's a piece in which style and substance figure as enamoured equals engaged in a delightful dance. Recognition of its achievements is evident in the award of a Special Commendation in the

Documentary category at the Prix Europa in 2012. Radio maker, sound artist and poet Pejk Malinovski has produced a substantial body of audio features and an impressive list of international broadcast credits including features for WNYC's Studio 360. He has been recognised for his soundwork before; he won the Director's Choice in 2004 and an Honorable Mention in 2008 at what has been referred to as the 'Sundance' of Radio competitions: the Third Coast International Audio Festival. Clearly committed to the artistry of storytelling in sound, Malinovski is also founder of Third Ear (http://thirdear.dk/), a digital magazine producing audio-based documentaries, and is a Programming Advisor for UnDo, a Centre for Documentary Art in Brooklyn, New York. Malinovski brings a literary and musical sensibility to his work, an approach to aural storytelling increasingly being described as the 'new wave' of radio documentaries and features characterised by the use of 'sound to tell *true* stories *artfully*'. (Biewen 2010, p.5)

Malinovski's journey into the heart of Poetry is the central narrative frame of this work. The story starts online in Denmark with Google and an incongruous image of 'Poetry' painted on a water tower. Soon Malinovski is in what seems like an American road movie punctuated by the sound of the radio hovering between stations and the digital directions of a GPS navigator. He travels, as if back in time, through territory made intensely familiar to us through film and television westerns. A stranger in Poetry, he plants himself outside the 'gas' station and waits for company. Curiosity, country hospitality and the unhurried melodic Texan drawl pull Malinovski in; his status shifts as he is invited for coffee, then lunch, given the grand tour and then finally offered a place to stay in Poetry.

An ensemble cast of fourteen characters including a cowboy called Rooster, Don Strickland, the undeclared mayor of Poetry, schoolchildren, various religious leaders and the local historian give voice to the community. They sketch a familiar tale of a dying country town with traditional old-school values and a 40-page colonial history. In counterpoint to his exploration of the town and community, Malinovski weaves an elegant narration. A published poet himself, Malinovski muses on the meaning of poetry, drawing on definitions in Greek and German and quotes from named and unnamed poets. At the climax of the work the two expressions of Poetry/poetry converge – we hear a poem about the slow death of the town that is written by a local, while Malinovski finds a metaphor for Poetry in an old red tractor that resonates with the Williams Carlos Williams poem, *The Red Wheelbarrow*. The image of 'poetry' that Malinovski aurally articulates vibrates between the actual and the literary. Like a flip card with a picture of a bird on one side and a cage on the other that is animated through movement, Malinovski manages to capture and express something about Poetry that is intangible, provocative, playful and beautiful with a delightfully light touch.

What then makes this story so engaging as a radio documentary or 'soundwork' (Hilmes 2013, p.43)? A potentially useful term here is 'radiogenic', a not quite elegant appropriation of the word 'photogenic', but nevertheless generative in terms of thinking about the affordances of sound as a storytelling medium. Drawing on the words of ex-BBC producer and department head, Peter Everett, Chignell (2009, p.93) defines 'radiogenic' as 'particularly suited to radio –

utilising to the maximum its distinctive qualities'. Chignell outlines a proposition for radiogenic elements or sound textures and story types; these include speech, the sonic environment, music and works exploring thoughts, psychological states and ideas. Relatedly, Lindgren (2011, p.220) has also discussed types of narratives or particular content that work well in sound, putting it neatly as 'stories about things we cannot see'.

My own approach to thinking about how a work is 'suited to radio' is how sound, as opposed to the meaning of words, is used to express story and impart information. The adage that great storytellers '*show* rather than tell' is just as relevant for aural as it is for visual media – we show with sound, or more precisely, the compositional use of non-verbal aural cues.

I'm using 'non-verbal cues' here as a blanket description for the gamut of ways that sound carries information without explanation. Clearly the cause or roots of some sounds are instantly recognisable or require only minimal contextualisation and verbal signposts to make sense. The surface of a sound – characteristics such as timbre, quality, tone and texture – also imparts significant information. 'Talk', for example, reveals not just information about the speaker, such as their possible gender, background and mood, but also clues and fragments about where and when they are. Inside spaces sound different to outside and the timbre and rhythms of our voices change over the course of a day. We hear the speakers' level of certainty and confidence in their words; 'thinking out loud' has an aural quality that is distinct from scripted speech. The spoken word also positions the listener: we recognise when we are being addressed and when we are listening in to others. We also hear someone as close, whispering in our ears or calling from afar – even if the volume of the audio signal remains the same. The way sounds are composed or arranged in time also provides vital non-verbal cues that direct the listener's attention and shape the meaning of the content. In both making and making sense of stories in sound we draw, consciously or unconsciously, on our tacit, culturally specific knowledge of the dominant non-verbal languages of the world – music. When sounds, considered in their entirety, are artfully arranged and composed within a montage, 'a kind of alchemy takes place, a transformation of base materials into gold'. (Hall in Biewen and Dilworth 2010, p.102)

The aural building blocks of *Poetry, Texas* are spoken words. Abstract sound plays a minor role; we may hear a cow mooing, grain being shovelled, or the sound effect of a train passing. But these sounds are few and isolated, presented as spot sounds and punctuation as opposed to more complex aural images or experiential montages. Observational audio, and scenes in which the microphone is not the self-conscious object of directed attention, are used as locational colour rather than playing a more central role of advancing narrative. The sonic complexity of the piece is expressed through the rich variety of voices heard and the nuanced composition of the sound textures used.

The introduction to *Poetry, Texas* provides a good example of Malinovski's compositional approach to directing the ear by developing meaning and significance through non-verbal cues:

AUDIO CLIP: Poetry, Texas (1)

https://soundcloud.com/radiodocreview/poetry-excerpt1-intro

Opening with a string of short quotes from several speakers, the regularly paced phrases are punctuated by location spot sounds and set to music. The words spoken establish the tension between the different meaning of the word 'poetry'. The repetition of tone, timbre and phrasing across the voices suggest a parity between speakers, and later we realise that all the speakers are expressions of the one voice – the community of Poetry. The voices align with the beat of the music, drawing attention to the track, the music swells and is momentarily isolated – it seems significant but we don't yet know why. (This subtle aural mystery is resolved at the end of the documentary when the music track is finally repeated, and the narrative reveals that it is a song about Poetry written and performed by a local). The aural texture changes, the music and location atmosphere exit, dropping sonic density to silence and tuning our ears into the importance of what will come next. We hear the voice of Malinovski as narrator – the main character and dominant voice in this work.

The sonic frame of *Poetry, Texas* articulates two distinct aural planes that both extend and enhance the thematic dynamic he develops between the literal and literary meaning of 'poetry'. Malinovski's physical journey and the town community are both represented by earthy unrehearsed location recordings. These include interview responses and unscripted questions, some under-the-breath murmurs that might be thought of as location narration and snatches of observational material such as the sound of Malinovski being greeted as he enters someone's house. The recordings position the listener as an observer rather than the one spoken to. The material feels experiential and 'of the moment'; it is steeped in a diegetic sense of a lived environment and continuous timeframe. In contrast, Malinovski's narration is controlled, scripted and recorded in a dead room with a warm, close microphone. The character of the sound is timeless and spaceless and the listener is addressed directly and intimately– as if it's 'just us two' on a higher, non-diegetic reflective plane.

The use of two distinctive sound textures to signify contrasting types of narrative content is a simple but highly effective compositional technique that aids comprehension, making it easier for the listener to 'know where they are' in the piece and join the dots. It is also a device that expands the spatial canvas of the work and provides opportunities for sonic drama and drive.

The excerpt below illustrates the two dominant sonic textures in this work. In it we hear a cut between location audio and narration via transitional music.

AUDIO CLIP: Poetry, Texas (2)

https://soundcloud.com/radiodocreview/poetry-excerpt2

The excerpt starts with Don Strickland in location interview, the voice recording is embedded with subtle but live atmosphere, the slide guitar enters, highlighting the speaker's image of strapping youth, the Poetry Boys in times gone by. The

location atmosphere extends beyond the voice and fades under the music and Malinovski's narration enters, the listener is lifted from the moment 'on location' in Poetry, Texas and asked to ponder the 'past' along the other side of the thread– the genesis of the word, poetry. The sonic shift mirrors the narrative segue, highlighting what it is we are to understand from the meaning of words and heralding a change in direction.

Aural storytelling is well suited to depicting simultaneous events. Once the significance of a sound texture within the aural framework of a piece is established it can be developed and manipulated without losing its referent. In the first of the following excerpts, narration overlays observational material and in the second, location interview.

AUDIO CLIP: Poetry, Texas (3): *going into Kathy Wilson's home*

https://soundcloud.com/radiodocreview/poetry-excerpt3?in=radiodocreview/sets/excerpts-from-poetry-texas

AUDIO CLIP: Poetry, Texas (4): *interviewing Nick Rice*

https://soundcloud.com/radiodocreview/poetry-excerpt4?in=radiodocreview/sets/excerpts-from-poetry-texas

In these excerpts Malinovski uses the narration to perform a variety of functions: flesh out narrative points, sketch images with words, contribute commentary that seems to reflect his thoughts and to add key information that changes the way we understand or locate significance in the location material heard. This style of narration centralises the presence, perspective and studio sound of the narrator/producer, placing the locational material and subject in a secondary, support role.

This is a dominant aspect of the work that I struggled with in terms of my own taste preferences and history as a practitioner working in the observational documentary genre. A strong reliance on this form of authorial first-person narration can, it seems to me, easily become heavy-handed and narratively swamp and overpower other voices and sounds. Of course the mitigating quality here is the poetic inclination of Malinovski's narration – the degree to which his thoughts, ideas and arguments provide a permeable and playful series of observations, connections and resonant sound-word ideas for listeners to engage with. It's a fine line to tread, but on the whole I think Malinovski succeeds admirably in not creating too self-focused a piece (though at some level all travel narratives are as much about the traveller as the destination), by letting the sounds of words and human voices create some twenty-eight minutes of radiogenic poetry.

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AUDIO:

Podcast of *Poetry, Texas* available at http://fallingtree.co.uk/listen/poetry_texas

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